BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING
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Psalm 46
Mark 12:13–17
Genesis 12:1–4

"I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you, and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing."
Genesis 12:2 (NRSV)

Every human being counts.
If we truly believe that, reflect upon it and act upon it
as a nation and in our own lives,
we will have the basis for unity within our borders
and with freedom-loving people around the world.
We will take and hold the high ground
against the apostles of hate who say murder is pleasing to God.
We will steadily erode the legitimacy of dictators and tyrants
who claim virtual divinity for themselves.
We will live up to our founding ideals.
We will take a small step forward in meeting the demands of religious faith.
And we will more fully earn the right to ask—
though never demand or simply assume—
that God bless America.

Madeleine Albright
"The Mighty and the Almighty: American Foreign Policy and God"

We come, O God, our hearts full of gratitude:
for our nation, for the freedom to be here worshiping in freedom and security.
Now startle us again with your truth and your love.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Blessed to be a blessing": the phrase comes from the story of Abraham and Sarah and the covenant God establishes with them. But it came to me from my cousin Frank long before I knew about the twelfth chapter of Genesis. Frank Buchanan, one of my balcony people, that communion of saints

looking over my shoulder, was the oldest son of my father's oldest brother. When I was in the first grade, Frank was a twenty-three-year-old Army Air Corp Captain, piloting a B-26 over North Africa and Italy. On the Fourth of July 1943, Frank, leading a squadron of thirty-one B-26 bombers, was shot down over Sicily. He got his crew out safely, bailed out, was wounded and captured by Italian forces, and was held in an Italian POW camp. When Italy surrendered and American POWs were to be transferred to Germany, he and some others escaped, were sheltered by an Italian family, and finally made their way back to American lines. He returned home after the war a genuine hero, a Major now, limping slightly from his wound, and married his high school sweetheart, Shirley, in the First Presbyterian Church of Altoona. I was impressed, to say the least, with all this daring and drama and romance.

And then he surprised the whole family. He moved to Colorado, an unthinkable thing for a Buchanan to do. Nobody ever moved or lived anywhere else. Frank picked up and moved to what seemed like a frontier. And that was the first Genesis 12 lesson he taught me. Sometimes you have to leave all that is certain and safe and stable and secure to trust God with your future—which is, of course, exactly what Abraham and Sarah did back on the edge of history.

Frank earned his law degree at the University of Colorado, settled in Boulder, joined a law firm, and began a highly successful practice. He and Shirley had four wonderful children, among them two Presbyterian ministers, a lawyer, and a real estate developer. Frank was a respected leader in his church and community and was elected mayor of Boulder.

Over the years he paid attention to me, encouraged me to go to college, to pursue my dreams, to never give up, and, at absolutely critical times, it always seemed, when resources were at an end, during college and divinity school, sent an encouraging note with a fifty dollar bill enclosed, a gift from God.

When he died in 1986, his family asked me to be part of the funeral and to speak. I traveled to Colorado. We sat down in the living room to talk, and Frank's family told me more about his remarkable life. He was always doing something, always had a project, always was thinking of ways to make his family, his church, city, the world, better.

"What was at his core?" I asked. What did he most deeply believe? What did he live by? I was surprised when they told me it was Genesis 12, our text this morning, God calling Abraham and Sarah to pick up and move into a new and unknown future, trusting God. And, they said, his very favorite Bible verse, which he told them over and over, was what else God said to Abraham and Sarah: "I will bless you and you will be a blessing."

That's how he lived, they said: "Blessed to be a blessing."

It is at the very heart of our religion: God calls, God blesses, God calls those who are blessed to be a blessing—a tantalizing thought this morning as we think about our nation, so richly blessed, on the 229th anniversary of its independence.

We began last Sunday a series of summer sermons on the great stories of our faith from the book of Genesis, the strong foundation stories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Abrahamic tradition. The first of these stories was about Noah, the great flood, the ark, rainbow, and the promise that God will never abandon the creation, a promise made—amazingly, uniquely—not to one family, one people, but to every living creature. God's chosen people are all the people of earth.

Today, Abraham and Sarah: an elderly couple getting along in years, settled in their ways, comfortable, secure, looking forward to spending the rest of their days with all they had accumulated, enjoying the fruits of their labors. To Abraham and Sarah, a voice comes and the first thing it says is "Go." "Go from your country and your kindred, and your father's house, to the land I will show you."

Remarkable. The goal in Abraham and Sarah's culture was to accumulate enough property and livestock that you didn't have to move ever again. Abraham and Sarah have arrived—and now the voice of God is telling them to move, to strike out on a new and risky adventure.

The foundation of our religion is a concept of God as one who promises never to abandon and as one who calls men and women to live their lives courageously, willing to leave safety and security and to trust God with their future—a relevant word for us whenever we are striking out into an unknown future, doing something new and different and frightening. That's the first word God says to Abraham and Sarah: "Go." The second word is "Blessing." "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . In you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

God chose Abraham and Sarah and their progeny not for privilege but for purpose. God promises to bless them not for their enjoyment, but so that they will be a blessing to every family on earth.

Jewish theologian Irving Greenberg, in a new book on Jewish-Christian relationships, says about Noah and Abraham: "Once God established a covenant with all humanity, the next step was to call into being a distinctive covenant people . . . to proclaim God by doing what is right and just" (*For*

the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity, p. 55); "being chosen translates into a mission to bring God and the divine blessing to a world that needs them" (p. 58).

To be blessed is to have work to do, not a bad principle for life as individuals or as a church. We are blessed here at Fourth Presbyterian Church by history, by strategic decisions people before us made about location and architecture. And through the decades Fourth Presbyterian Church has continued to understand its blessings not in terms of privilege but responsibility, and it continues to aspire to be a blessing to its community, city, and world.

At its best, Israel—the Jewish people—have always understood their chosenness not in terms of privilege, but responsibility to be a light to the Gentiles, to show the world how God wants human life to be lived. Blessed to be a blessing.

And, I would suggest, this ancient principle is an appropriate and holy challenge to our nation. How blessed we are!

I'm reading and loving David McCullough's new book, *1776*. What a remarkable and unlikely story. The year 1776 began ominously. A mighty British navy, 400 ships, the most powerful naval force ever assembled, sailed into New York harbor, where the Continental Army was. On July 2, 1776, 32,000 British Regulars landed on Staten Island—the same day the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, voted to renounce their allegiance to the king and dissolve their connection with Great Britain. McCullough comments, "By renouncing their allegiance to the king the delegates at Philadelphia had committed treason and embarked on a course from which there could be no turning back." Typically, John Adams grasped the importance of what was happening. He wrote, "We are in the very midst of a revolution, the most complete, unexpected and remarkable of any in the history of nations" (p. 136).

He was right. Presbyterians were deeply involved. In January of 1776, the Reverend John Rodgers, pastor of the Presbyterian Church on Wall Street, preached a fiery sermon in which he exhorted the young men in his congregation to be brave and to fight for their freedom. And when the resolution declaring the independence of the thirteen colonies was passed, the only clergy member of the Congress and signer of the Declaration was one of ours, John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton.

In 1776, the British far outnumbered the Continentals, were better trained, provisioned, and led. Their navy was the most powerful the world had ever seen. We had none. In the battles that ensued in Brooklyn and around New

York, the Continental Army was badly defeated, retreated in chaos, miraculously escaped across the Hudson River to regroup and fight another day.

It was not a religious war. But the values for which it was fought most certainly are: human liberty, the autonomy and dignity of the individual, the freedom of the individual conscience from coercion by state government or church. These are ideas that grow out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly the Presbyterian branch. But the Founders, those brave patriots who signed the Declaration of Independence and pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" were believers and atheists, Enlightenment Deists and orthodox Christians. And when they gathered a few years later to write a constitution, they created a republic that did something no other political system in the world ever tried: the separation of a state from religion. Instead, here there would be religious freedom. The state would be neutral. There would be no state- sponsored church here. Instead, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a famous letter in 1802, there would be a "wall of separation" between church and state. There would be religious freedom here—freedom for citizens to believe and practice religion according to their conscience and freedom not to believe and practice, freedom for churches to conduct their business and go about their mission in freedom. And there would be tolerance, acceptance of minority opinions, a respect for religious diversity that has become a wonder to behold and, I believe deeply, in a world torn apart by religion, by political ideology fired by sectarian religion, a blessing that is ours to enjoy, to show and nurture and protect and share with the world.

Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, in a speech at Yale Divinity School, offered her prescription for the healing of our nation and the world. "It will not be by claiming that we Americans have unique access to the will of God. Rather we can be as good as our highest ideals. . . . Affirming and acting as if we really believe that every human being counts." That, she said, "will give us the right to ask—not demand or assume—that God bless America."

And yet one of the characteristics of the age in which we live is a bitterly divided body politic in which every political issue seems also to be a religious issue—the desecration of the Koran in American military prisons, veto of scientific research, reproductive rights, state interference in end-of-life issues, the Ten Commandments in court rooms, so-called defense of marriage.

Former Senator John Danforth, Republican, Anglican priest, wrote a provocative essay recently, "Onward, Moderate Christian Soldiers" (*New York Times,* 17 June 2005), in which he observed that America's culture wars are not between people of faith and nonbelievers but between people

of faith who come to different conclusions on specific issues. “In recent years, conservative Christians have presented themselves as representing the one authentic Christian perspective.” But, Senator Danforth noted, “equally devout Christians come to very difference conclusions.” Some of us concluded that the faithful thing to do was to allow Terri Schiavo to die and that it was “more loving than imposing government power to keep her hooked up to a feeding tube.” Some of us, on the basis of our faith, regard stem cell research as an opportunity to enhance and bless human life. Some of us conclude, on the basis of our faith, that the right of a woman to chose to bear a child is between her and her doctor and God and not the state.

Senator Danforth wrote that moderate Christians are no less faithful than conservative Christians. We go to church, pray, and read our Bibles.

To claim, as the religious right regularly does, that their conclusions on a whole range of issues—from marriage to the environment, from private sexual behavior to school curriculum to the war in Iraq—are the only right positions is not only not helpful, but a repudiation of the basic notion of tolerance and respect on which our nation was founded.

Jim Wallis puts it simply and eloquently: “God is not partisan. God is not a Republican or a Democrat. When either party tries to politicize God, or co-opt religious communities for their political agendas, they make a terrible mistake.”

Wallis is an evangelical Christian with impeccable credentials. He has a best seller, *God’s Politics; Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.”*

> God’s politics challenges everything about our politics. . . . God’s politics reminds us of the people our politics always neglect—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind. God’s politics challenges narrow, national, ethnic, economic, or cultural self-interest, reminding us of a much wider world and the creative human diversity of all those made in the image of the creator.

Wallis and others wonder why conservative Christians, liberal Christians, and moderate, middle-of-the-road Christians can’t stop arguing about abortion and homosexuality—which are not issues about which Jesus had anything to say—and start working together on education, health care, and most of all poverty—justice for poor people, about which he had a great deal to say. There is much to be done.

In fact there is an intriguing and very hopeful new development along these lines. Dreadful poverty in Africa, the AIDs pandemic, African nations burdened with enormous debt are issues that finally are receiving the

attention and advocacy of people of faith from many world religions and, remarkably within the Christian family, among people who more frequently argue, fight, and refuse to talk to one another. As the G-8 nations gather in Scotland this week, huge collaborations between faith communities are actually cooperating to urge generosity and justice: Nelson Mandela, Charles Colson, Bishop Tutu, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, and, my favorite, Bono and U2.

My hope and prayer is that my richly blessed nation will become a blessing to the world as it has in the past, when after World War II, for instance, we set ourselves to the work of reconciliation and peacemaking by rebuilding Europe and Japan.

There is work to do. In her speech at Yale, Madeline Albright said, “I am proud to be an American. But our country does rank dead last among the industrialized nations in the proportion of our wealth we share with the developing world.”

“Opposing terrorism is not the end,” she said, “just the beginning. . . . If we truly care about life, we must see that the majority of the world’s people are threatened each day by an axis of evil: poverty, ignorance, and disease.”

We are so blessed, and we could be such a blessing if we accepted our responsibility to lead the world in a war against poverty, unnecessary suffering, and injustice.

One time, near the end of his ministry on earth, the deepening conflict between Jesus and the political and religious authorities of his day came to the surface. His critics come to him, asking a trick question, hoping to embarrass or discredit him. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor—the state, the hated occupying forces of the Roman Empire?” If Jesus says, “Pay the tax,” it is legitimate he will offend the patriots. If he says, “Don’t pay it,” he will commit sedition. His response is remarkable. “Let me see a coin.” The image of Caesar is on it. “Give it to him,” Jesus says. “It’s his. Give God what is God’s.”

God alone is sovereign, the only king of creation. Everything belongs to God. All people. “I am exalted among the nations,” the psalmist wrote (Psalm 46:10). All nations are accountable to God.

At its best, this nation understands that, accepts the responsibility to be a blessing to the world. At its best our nation acknowledges, encourages, nurtures the freedom for individuals to give their ultimate allegiance to God, respects the diversity of beliefs and practices that a free people will treasure. And it is that system, at its best, that tolerance and respect that, I

deeply believe, is both our blessing with which we are blessed and the blessing we are called to share with the world.

In the darkest days of 1776, Thomas Paine wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” These are not easy times. We are engaged in military action in Iraq and Afghanistan that is not going very well at the moment. Young Americans are fighting and dying. A well-organized insurgency in both nations seems to be getting stronger in both human and military resources. For reasons we either do not or will not understand, young zealots are willing to blow themselves up to strike at us.

Some think we shouldn’t be there, that it was a tragic mistake. Others think it is an important and noble cause, worth the lives of American sons and daughters. Still others, who disagree on that, conclude that we cannot leave now and must remain until there are stable governments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I continue to believe that our best values can see us through and yet make us a blessing to the world—respect for others, protection for minorities, tolerance toward people of different beliefs or no beliefs, vigorous public debate that values a diversity of opinions and that encourages a patriotism that wants this country to be better than it is, more generous, more compassionate, more inclusive, more committed to the rule of law.

We are blessed, richly and profoundly blessed, by our history, blessed with resources and a magnificent diversity of people, blessed with a system of government that protects freedom, nurtures liberty, extends equality and opportunity to all. With our blessing—as individuals, as a church, as a nation—comes responsibility, as old as the story of Abraham and Sarah.

The first word God spoke to them was “go” and the second was “blessing.”

Frank Buchanan was right, I believe.

Blessed to be a blessing. Amen.